

REVIEW

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Raider of the Lost Archives

By Anthony Egan

In an age where popular history is 'packaged' into manageable bytes suitably sanitised for the heritage industry, and where academic writing's importance is all too often in indirect proportion to its unreadability, it is a joy to find a serious scholar who combines analytical originality with a narrative that has the pace of a thriller. Such an intellectual 'social bandit' (in the best Hobsbawmian sense of the term) is Charles van Onselen. His apparently effortlessly executed account of Irish bandits, corrupt cops, inept politicians and displaced Fenians in latter nineteenth century southern Africa is both intellectually thought-provoking and a literary delight.

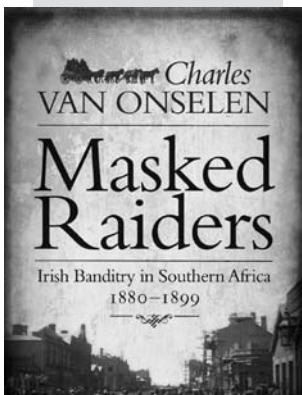
Many of the European immigrants who came to seek their fortunes in the diamond fields and gold mines in the late nineteenth century were Irishmen. (I know this well: my ancestors were among those who came to get rich, but found that a few fellows like Rhodes and Barnato had beaten them to it). Some came from Ireland, others – often compliments of the British Army – via the Irish slums of Manchester, Liverpool and London.

Of those in the army stationed at Fort Napier, Pietermaritzburg, nicknamed the 'School of Banditry', a few deserted and took up careers in private enterprise: highway robbery, raiding banks and safecracking. This loose and informal company, sometimes called the 'Irish Brigade', augmented by Irishmen born in southern Africa, constituted the greatest headache to the forces of law and order of the Transvaal (Zuid Afrikaansche Republiek), the Orange Free State, and the British governments of the Northern Cape and Natal. As the author shows, some were even more multinational in their scope, moving at times into Lesotho and Portuguese East Africa for shelter or profit.

Although by no means archetypal Robin Hoods, some enjoyed the status of social bandits among the workers in the mining camps and towns of southern Africa. Hardly philanthropists, they were nonetheless seen as persons who could get one over on the mining barons and government bureaucrats.

Van Onselen recounts the lives and careers of some of these morally ambivalent heroes. There were the McKeone brothers, Jack and Hugh, who were locally born, fluent in what today would be Afrikaans and Sesotho, close to Basotho chiefs (their sister, a runaway nun, even married one to the shock of white society), adept at bank and highway robberies, who repeatedly escaped from prison cells. Jack, in fact, got clear away, probably to Australia. Hugh and his sidekick William Cooper were finally caught, convicted and sentenced to death for robbery and attempted murder. The sentence became a cause celebre, generating protest from many citizens, and was finally commuted to life imprisonment.

Even more daring and notorious was John McLaughlin, safecracker and bank robber on the Rand, whose audacity included a very public intention to kill an informant, the execution of said traitor George Stevenson in Johannesburg, followed by a very public dinner in a city restaurant while the hapless ZAR police force searched for him. To add insult to injury, McLaughlin then escaped from the Transvaal and spent over a decade on the run throughout the British Empire before capture and extradition from Australia.



MASKED RAIDERS: Irish Banditry in Southern Africa 1880-1899, by Charles van Onselen; Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2010; Pb. 292pp; ISBN 978-1-77022-080-5

He was hanged in Pretoria in 1910.

While the activities of the 'Irish Brigade' was primarily criminal activity for personal gain, van Onselen shows that they had strongly political and class undercurrents, particularly the sympathy for them expressed by many miners and white working class. Thankfully the author resists the temptation to make more of this than the evidence allows; we are not subjected to Procrustean tortured theorising of 'proletarian consciousnesses'.

Where overt politics does show up is in van Onselen's tantalising account of the sojourn of Arthur Griffith, later the first president of the Irish Free State, on the Rand. Irish nationalism was clearly part of the popular consciousness at the time, not least among deserters from the British army some of whom formed the 'Irish Brigade'. Indeed he notes early on that one of the most common features of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (forerunner of the IRA) was a period of service in the British Army.

Griffith's time in the Transvaal has never been fully explained. He ran for a while a fairly unsuccessful newspaper, but did not seem the worse for it. He didn't return to Ireland out of pocket; if anything he seems to have done quite well. A police report the author discovered refers to a 'Mr A Griffiths' suspected of smuggling gold amalgam. Could Griffith be the mysterious Griffiths of the report?

What too were the connections of other known Irish nationalists in the Transvaal, to the mystery surrounding the ship the *Dorothea*, sunk off the Natal coast in 1898? Was it carrying gold, whether for profit or to further the Fenian cause? Van Onselen, who respects his sources too much to leap to conclusions, is rightly guarded in his judgments, though he is all too aware as a historian that revolutions in other times and places have been assisted through criminal activities.

Charles van Onselen's underlying project in this book, I think, is part of his wider historical interest in

reconfiguring the way we understand the history of the South African 'mineral revolution'. Looking at his earlier works like *New Nineveh*, *New Babylon* (the Rand in the early 20th Century) and the South African parts of *The Fox and the Flies* (late 19th-early 20th Century), he is taking us progressively backwards to the discovery of gold and diamonds in a way that shifts the focus from the (potentially) triumphalist history of wealth and progress, of magnates and politicians, to those who did not become rich and powerful. (Here, too, I think of my Irish ancestors, who did not become other Rhodes or Barnatos).

He also highlights, through his account of the foibles of states that battled to cope with miscreant miners and bandits bold, the real difficulties faced by agrarian states experiencing the transition from a 'horse economy' to industrial modernity. If crime is often an all too outward subtle sign of social conflict, the challenge of the Irish bandits might well be read as a Gramscian morbid symptom of the tensions of dying orders and a new society being born.

The strength of this book is the way in which van Onselen manages to introduce such ideas by stealth, within the context of what can easily be read on one level as a rollicking historical tale of crime, corruption and (occasional) punishment. He does not belabour the reader with theory, but offers enough clues for us to connect the dots if we wish. Nor does he treat hypotheses as fact: in a similar manner to the way in which he suggested that Lithuanian-born international gangster Joseph Silver could have been the infamous Jack the Ripper¹, he clearly delineates fact from speculation.

Added to this is the quality of Professor van Onselen's writing. His turn of phrase is elegant, witty and littered with literary allusions (even to Enid Blyton's inept policeman Mr Plod!). Few academics trained from their youth in academese should consider a second career in literature. I suspect that Charles van Onselen could be an exception to the rule.

NOTES

1 See: Charles van Onselen, *The Fox and the Flies: The Criminal Empire of the Whitechapel Murderer* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2007), chapter 25. Here, and in the subtitle, he is far more 'dogmatic' about his claim (that Silver was Jack the Ripper) than his theorizing about Griffith, but he is nonetheless respectful of the reader in presenting what is circumstantial evidence at best as precisely that. This is more than can be said for all too numerous authors, many of whom write with decidedly less elegance than van Onselen, who claim to have 'solved' this baffling mystery.